

## **Out of the Darkness...Into the Light**

John 3:1-17

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My older brother made an F in algebra when he was in the seventh grade. He probably wouldn't be too happy if he knew I was telling you this, but since he's not here, he'll never know. He made an F, but it wasn't because he didn't work at it. I remember some of those nights when he would struggle to do his algebra homework and almost come to tears because it just didn't make any sense to him—all those X's and Y's instead of numbers. He even went to a tutor to get help, but he just simply didn't get it. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he worked, he was completely in the dark.

But then one day, it was like a light came on. One day he understood; he got it. I remember that day because that night when we went to bed, he taught me algebra. He was so excited that he couldn't contain himself so he shared his newfound knowledge with me.

I don't really remember what he said that night, but I do know that when I took algebra myself a couple of years later, it was easy for me, because Bill had already taught it to me.

Maybe some of you have had a similar experience of light dawning. You struggle and struggle to understand something, but things just don't click; they don't fit. Something is missing; you're in the dark. But then one day, for some inexplicable reason, the light begins to dawn, and you begin to understand. And over time, things become clearer.

Now I think that maybe Nicodemus, from this morning's scripture, was experiencing something like this. Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John, and the scripture we read this morning is the first time we meet him.

Let me tell you about Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a very religious man. That meant that he was not like your average run-of-the-mill Hebrew; he was not content with doing just the bare minimum that most people did; he went a step beyond in the practice of his faith.

Every day he would rise and repeat the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength." As the law required, Nicodemus had that scripture printed on the doorpost of his house so that he would be reminded of it when he went in and when he came out. He wore phylacteries, small leather boxes that held scripture verses. He did this because the law said that you were to wear the scripture as a "frontlet between your eyes."

Nicodemus was a committed follower of the Old Testament law. When it came to tithing, he was so careful that he even tithed of the herbs that grew in his garden, bringing one tenth of his produce as a gift to God.

Also, the law required that a person fast at least one day a year. But if once a year was good, then twice each week must be excellent, and that is what Nicodemus and the other Pharisees did.

Nicodemus was so outstanding in his devotion that he was chosen to serve on the Sanhedrin, the governing religious council—like our Session, maybe? Whenever there were any religious disputes, they would be brought to the Sanhedrin to be settled. By any standard, Nicodemus was an outstanding religious leader of his day.

But there was something missing. No matter how faithful he was in his daily prayers and scripture reading, no matter how much he tithed or gave to the poor, no matter how frequently he fasted, still something was missing. There was something that didn't quite click. It was like one of those times when you stand in front of the refrigerator with the door open. You know you're hungry for something, but you just can't figure out what it is. It was like that for Nicodemus. He was hungry for something, but he just couldn't figure out what it was.

The first time that the light began to dawn for Nicodemus was when he heard about Jesus. The time that he began to think that maybe his hunger might be satisfied was when he heard about Jesus. I can imagine that Nicodemus had heard the accounts of some of Jesus' miraculous acts—like healing the sick, and turning the water into wine. Perhaps he had even witnessed some of Jesus' deeds. Had he heard Jesus talk about God's love?

Slowly something like a light began to dawn, and Nicodemus began to have a glimmer of hope that his deep hunger might be satisfied. He wanted to know more about Jesus; he wanted to talk to him.

So one night, after dark, Nicodemus slipped through the back streets, ducking in and out of doorways, pulling his hat down over his eyes, hiding behind a newspaper—cloak and dagger type stuff—and he went to see Jesus. He had to be secretive because it wouldn't have looked very good in the eyes of his fellow Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin if he were seen talking to Jesus. So he went secretly.

When they met, Nicodemus said to Jesus, "I know you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him."

And Jesus responded, "Truly, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above, born again."

But Nicodemus misunderstood what Jesus was saying. He thought Jesus meant that you had to be born a second time, so he said, "How can I do that? I can't enter my mother's womb and be born again."

So Jesus explained. "I'm not talking about being born again in that way, but about how God's Holy Spirit works in people and touches their hearts and lives and makes them brand new people.

"I'm talking about God's love for the world. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his son into the world to be its judge but to be its savior."

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus continued, but then Jesus said, "There's one more thing. It's about being a disciple. It's one thing to THINK about being a disciple; it's another thing to BE a disciple. Disciples are people who let their faith be seen in the light. Whoever does what is true comes to the light in order that the light may show that he is obedient to God."

That's where the conversation ended that night. I can imagine Nicodemus going home that night with questions swirling in his head. Surely he must have wondered: How could he, Nicodemus, dare to be an open follower of Jesus? He was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a leader of the Jews. What would they say if they knew that he believed that Jesus was from God?

That's the first time we meet Nicodemus.

He disappears from the story for a couple of chapters, but then we hear his name a second time. It was like this. The Pharisees had sent some guards out to arrest Jesus, and they came back empty handed. Some of the Pharisees began making snide remarks about how the gullible guards were fooled by Jesus' smooth talk. But "one of the Pharisees, a man named Nicodemus, said to the others, 'according to our law we cannot condemn a man before hearing him and finding out what he has done.'"

Now I'll admit that's certainly not a bold assertion of discipleship, but it's a step. At least Nicodemus did not join the guilty-until-proven-innocent mentality of the rest of the Pharisees. When he spoke up, some of the Pharisees looked at him and said, "Not you too?" (John 7:37-52).

We don't hear any more about Nicodemus until chapter 19. This is the third time we hear his name. By this time in the gospel story, Jesus has been arrested, tried, convicted and crucified. He is dead. Two men come forward to claim the body and bury him—a man named Joseph...and Nicodemus. They took Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen cloth, anointed the body with spices used in burial, and placed his body in the tomb.

Finally Nicodemus stepped forward and boldly declared his love and devotion to Jesus. It no longer mattered who knew. He had no more doubts. He understood; he got it. The hunger in his soul was finally satisfied. He had come out from the darkness into the light.

That's the story of Nicodemus. It's a story of a man who slowly moved from darkness to light, from hunger to being fulfilled. As he experienced God's love in Jesus, it was almost like he became a brand new person, almost like he was born again. And when that light fully dawned for Nicodemus, he simply could no longer keep it to himself, but he had to share it with others. Just like my brother on that night he "got" algebra. He was too excited to keep it to himself; but he had to share it.

So maybe the question each one of us needs to ask is where we see ourselves in the story of Nicodemus. Maybe some of us are at that questioning place, seeking something to fill our deep hunger. Maybe others of us have taken some small steps, letting God's love begin to work in us. And then maybe there are others of us who have seen the light, and have heard and accepted and committed our lives to Jesus. The one thing I know is that once we have heard and accepted that good news, we simply must share it. That's what disciples do.

We have heard the good news of God's love. Let us live in such a way that God's love will be seen through us. Amen. ✠